

White-tailed Deer

Description:

White-tailed deer are highly successful and are the most widely-distributed hoofed animal on the continent. In Idaho, the white-tailed population is an estimated 200,000 deer. The distinct name comes from their 12-inch long tail which has bright white fur on the underside.

A White Flag for a Tail?

White-tailed deer are mainly crepuscular, meaning they are most active in the early morning and at dusk. In order to find them in these times of low light, it helps to know what they look like. White-tailed deer are grayish in winter and tan to reddish brown throughout the summer. Besides a solid coat, these deer also have a white underside and throat patch. When alarmed, whitetails wave their bright white tail back and forth like a flag to signal danger to other deer in the area. Antlers on bucks consist of a single non-branching beam with points coming off the main beam on each side. A large northern whitetail buck can weigh as much as 400 pounds, but normally this species is smaller than its cousin the mule deer. In the southern states, white-tailed deer are often smaller, weighing around 220 pounds.

Not a Mule Deer!

Both mule deer and white-tailed deer are found in Idaho, and it is important to know the difference between them. If you see them up close, there are two easy ways to tell them apart. First, check the tail. The mule deer's tail is black-tipped and hangs down. The white-tailed deer's tail is larger, uplifted, bushy, and all white. If you can't get a look at the tail, glance at the antlers. Mule deer's antlers are normally smaller and branch to form two equal forks, while the white-tailed deer has forward curving antlers with a number of points called tines. If you miss both of those clues, remember that whitetails have a more leisurely, graceful leap compared to that of the mule deer which has more of a bounding gait with all four hooves hitting the ground together.

Between Habitats

White-tailed deer can be found in various habitats from forests to fields but prefer to live around the edges of habitats. That means that great places to find a whitetail are areas like the borders of meadows, where the habitats of forest and field come together. In northern regions, whitetails usually require thick conifers for winter shelter but avoid forests that are too dense as well as wide-open spaces. In areas where the winters are severe, white-tailed deer often herd up in lowland areas with some coniferous cover in areas called "yards".

Be Careful, It's Cold Outside!

White-tailed deer eat different things depending upon the time of year and their location. Generally, these deer prefer grasses, forbs, leafy green browse, woody evergreen browse, acorns and other fruits. Winter weather conditions affect white-tailed deer populations more than predators because weather can cause a lack of food. Heavy snow accumulation can strongly affect populations because, when the deer use the same wintering grounds year after year, the plant supply is damaged and often malnutrition and starvation result.

In addition to losses due to the hard winter in the West, some canines, such as coyotes and wolves, prey on this species. Bears, bobcats and mountain lions also feed on white-tailed deer. The white-tailed deer is still a popular big game animal, especially in the eastern half of the United States. Hunters throughout the U. S. shoot more than a million white-tailed deer each hunting season.

Don't Become Dinner!

Like most prey animals, white-tailed deer focus much of their energy on eating and trying to avoid being eaten. White-tailed deer have developed great adaptations to keep them from becoming dinner for others. White-tailed deer vocalize with loud snorts, which almost sound like a whistle at times, serving as a danger signal. (sound bite) They are also famous for flashing their tails to alert danger and help fawns keep track of their mothers as they are feeding in dense brush. An acute sense of hearing allows early detection of approaching predators. A grayish coat in the winter blends in well with dead grass and the muted colors of the forest, camouflaging the deer into its surroundings. White-tailed deer also have a multi-part stomach where the first two chambers act as temporary storage, allowing the deer to eat quickly while always being ready to flee at a moment's notice. Food can be digested when the deer chews its cud in a safe place.

Spotted Fawns

The breeding season for white-tailed deer is from late October to mid-December, peaking in November. Females have one to two fawns (occasionally three in optimal habitat) which are born in May or June. The young are reddish-brown with white spots and are initially hidden for one to two weeks. They are usually weaned by ten weeks. Females may breed during their first fall but usually not until their second fall. Males reach sexual maturity around 18 months. Few individual white-tailed deer exceed the age of 10 years.

Wide Distribution

White-tailed deer are found from southern Canada, south through most of the United States and Mexico to South America, but are absent from dry, desert country and foothills through much of the southwestern U.S. In Idaho and some other northern Rocky Mountain states, these deer seem to prefer river bottoms and lowland areas. They are also more predominate in the northern parts of Idaho, avoiding the dry, desert portion of the state. Since populations seem to have increased in recent years, they have become pests in some suburban areas of the eastern U. S.



White-tailed Deer
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Footprint
No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** White-tailed Deer
2. **Scientific Name:** *Odocoileus virginianus*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: Male - 220 to 400 lbs.
Weight: Female - 120 to 250 lbs.
5. **Diet:** Grasses, forbs, leafy green browse, woody evergreen browse, acorns and other fruits.
6. **Young:** 1-2; called fawns.
7. **Lifespan:** 8-10 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Cervidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:**